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How Mental Health Problems Affect College Students — The Roles of The Family And
The School

When people are mentioning illness, they are talking about physiological (bodily) dysfunctions and pains, including but not limited to stomachache, infection, and cancer. Since the very first flame of human intelligence, people have noticed that the mind is closely related to the body: early thinkers, including Aristotle, studied the field of mind and behavior, and gradually figured out that the minds were affecting the behaviors no less than that of the body. As there exist disfunction and pain of body, there exist the phrase “mental illness” used to describe, as indicated by World Health Organization, “a combination of abnormal thoughts, perceptions, emotions, behavior and relationships with others” (Mental).

Since I used the analogy of physiological illness and mental illness, I do believe that the prevalence of mental illness is no less or merely slightly less than that of physiological illness — the occurrence of mental illness is not rare. Actually, everyone has the opportunity of the being a victim of mental illness. Since no one is guaranteed of not having mental illness in their life span, inquiring about the reasons of mental illness is exigent. Sadly, due to the complex nature of mental health, precisely determine the exact

reasons of mental illness is almost impossible, but plenty of researches have been done to answer the question of who is more vulnerable to mental health problems. Based on the research results concluded by SANE Australia, “mental illness is influenced by a complex combination of genetic, neurological, developmental, environmental, socio-economic, cultural, life experience and other factors (Fact).” College students, with ubiquitous stresses from family expectation, schoolwork, and peer-pressure, can be identified as a vulnerable group to mental health problems ranging from periodical anxiety to severe psychopathological illness.

Before talking about college students’ mental illness in depth. I should mention the differences between mental health problems and neurological disorders. Compared to mental health problems, the neurological disorders are more biologically based, and for the most time, more likely to be identified as abnormal. For example, in the titled case of *A Man Who Mistook His Wife for A Hat*, the man cannot identify things because of deficits on his lobes. The definition of neurology by Oliver Sacks is “an impairment or incapacity of neurological function, loss of speech, loss of language, loss of memory, loss of vision, loss of dexterity, loss of identity and myriad other losses and losses of specific functions (Sacks).” As a result, in the research paper, I am more focusing on mental health problems rather than neurological disorders.

Actually, mental health problems are threatening college students. Families and schools are playing crucial roles in students’ pathology, and therefore should make an effort and substantial improvements to help students struggling under mental health problems.

Although some people, including my parents, are skeptical of whether mental health problem has become an issue in college students' routine, college students are far more concerned and worried about it than most people's expectation. According to the data gathered by National Alliance on Mental Illness, about 33% of students self-reported having prolonged period of depression, 25% of students have reported suicidal attempt, and 50% of students rated that their mental health states were below the average (Garcia). Although people may argue that the self-awareness of mental health problems doesn't necessarily mean having disorders meeting the diagnostic criteria, the study conducted with community college students finds that "(mental health problems) on college campuses has contributed to increased campus violence incidents, suicide rates, and attrition rates among students." The study also shows not only four-year universities students, but also community college students are vulnerable to mental health disorders (Kalkbrenner). For instance, mental health problems are existing as a huge issue for college students.

First of all, families are significantly influential on college students' mental health problems. Appropriate family support can protect and rescue students from mental health problems. John Nash, one of the most prominent figures of mathematics, actually had suffered under prolonged schizophrenia, which, as SANE Australia indicates, is a relatively rare mental illness mainly caused by genetic factors (Fact). The film, *A Beautiful Mind*, depicts his pathology from his college years: he makes up the hallucination of a fake roommate, an unreal agent, and a nonsexist mission. However, he miraculously recovers from his schizophrenia and eventually wins Nobel Prize. In his

acceptance speech, he sincerely thanks his wife, who tries her best to support John Nash (Beautiful). Dorothy, John Nash's wife, is a good example of how family interactions help alleviate the symptoms upon a sufferer of mental health problems. The unconditional acceptance, constant care, and unremitting accompanying of Dorothy can be generalized as a guidance of what families should do to help the college students, potentially be or have already been, affected by mental health problems.

On contrary, bad family-student interaction and insufficient family support for students with mental health problems can lead to unpredictable bad consequences. The example is a Physics major student I know who is enrolled in my university, the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. He is an international student from China, and after four months of out of touch, his parents began being anxious, contacted his fellow students and the school officials to find out what on earth happened to him. The result was unexpected: during the past four months, he locked himself into his apartment without stepping out of the door for a single minute, and relied on delivery services. How could a normal functioning college student lock himself for such a long time? The answer is, he was not functioning normally—he had depression, which World Health Organization describes as a psychopathological disorder characterized by “sadness, loss of interest or pleasure, feelings of guilt or low self-worth, disturbed sleep or appetite, tiredness, and poor concentration (Mental).” Although blaming his family as the prime criminal of his depression is unfair, his family weighs in his development from mild mental problems to severe depression. As indicates in the case, the four months of out of touch reflects the lack of sufficient and caring interaction from his family. If his family

had noticed his stressors and mild symptoms, they would have helped suppress the progression of pathology as what Dorothy does. However, according to the data from National Alliance on Mental Illness, only seven percent of parents reported their children (that are college students) had experienced mental health issue (Rettner). Seemingly, there is a huge gap between the actual existence of the issue and the awareness from the family. When the families are not aware of, believe in, or realize how mental health problems are affecting the college students, the students are more likely to experience prolonged periods of onset because of the emotional isolation of their current mind states from their families.

Furthermore, schools are equivalently influential as families are on college students' mental health problems. Above all, the school environments that the students are within are closely related to students' mental health states. The stressful nature of college environment is significantly risky for students' mental health. Typical Stressors are deadlines for homework, test results, and peer pressure. The expectations from family members and the relatively limited job market are also stressors relates to college life. Those stressors are in different degrees: from mild stressors to severe stressors. Mild stressors can positively influence students' academic performances through acting as incentives of hard working. However, severe stressors can constantly challenge the mental states of college students, and might trigger the onset of anxiety. Actually, in a survey conducted by American Psychological Association (aka APA), anxiety ranks at the top of psychological issues for college students (College). Furthermore, first year college students experience more stressful lives and more vulnerable to mental health problems

than the rest of the students to mental health problems. The research conducted by Old Dominion University concludes that due to the sudden change of academic requirements, lifestyles, and environment, “students who are making the transition to college and living in university residence halls are at particularly increased risks for developing MHDs (Kalkbrenner).” According to the finding in the research “School Adjustment, Social Support, and Mental Health of Mainland Chinese College Students in Hong Kong,” if entering the college means a dramatic geographical and cultural change for the new coming college students, the change of school and social environment can trigger mental health disorders (Chui). Except for stressors, the inclusivenesses of universities also have impacts on students’ mental health problems. Carly Morgan, a woman having bulimia, recollected her experience in her memoir. Because of self-awareness, she dreamed about having a perfect body. After failed attempts, she began being bulimic. She mentions when others show her that body shape doesn’t matter, she begins withdrawing bulimia. If her college could help create a friendly and welcoming environment for the differences, including different body shapes, the path for the young adult to over come bulimia would be more straight forward. Thus, universities and colleges are responsible for offering their students the accessible supports for adjusting stress, and helping create welcoming environments for students to aware and face mental health problems.

The path of reaching this goal is not too hard to find out. Research shows that “collaborative advocacy efforts could involve nursing, psychology, and human services department collaboration to create mental health awareness curriculum and implantation of education support on campus.” To explain and reveal the effectiveness of these

“collaborative advocacy efforts,” I would like to start with an example, although I am alternatively using the terms “mental health problems” and “mental illnesses,” the effects of them are significantly different. Actually, the study also shows that using the term “mental health problems” is more likely to remove the stigmatic views from students (Holland), and therefore encouraging them to seek for help. An introductory course that evokes students’ awareness of the word choice is an example of how a “mental health awareness curriculum” helps students to conquer mental issues and recover sufficiently.

Fortunately, colleges are realizing their potentials toward solving the issue of mental health problems and have taken actions. I am proud to see that my university has increased the psychological counseling staffs in McKinley Health Center since the 1960s; moreover, when I reviewed consequentially edits and issues the handbooks of counseling, I found what had enhanced was not only the number of staff, but also the proficiency of them — from merely social workers to psychological clinicians.

Conversely, if schools, include but not limited to colleges and universities, don’t create friendly environments toward mental health problems, as states by Holland, students might have more stigmatic views on mental health problems (Holland), and therefore give up opportunities of saving themselves from mental health problems. Recall the previously discussed example of John Nash, in the movie, during his college life, he is mocked for his behaviors by people around him, unable to function normally regardless of his extraordinary academic abilities, and becomes deadly desperate after he finds out everything is fake (Beautiful). When I watched the film, I was impressed and depressed by how people reacted to his symptoms, including staring and mocking at him, as if he

was carrying an epidemic. I couldn't see much sympathy in his case, and the Princeton University, arguably the best university of this country, didn't have official support for students with mental illness. With the sufficient health care resources emerged in past decades, if John Nash was a college student in our era, he would have a better opportunity to function normally with schizophrenia.

Nevertheless, some may argue that I am denying the power of individuals themselves in conquering mental illness. Actually, I have no intention to do so. Since the mental health problems are dealing with people's inner minds, the abilities of coping with life problems, organized academic lives, and the willingness of recovering from mental health problems are essential — in the case of coping with stressors, Coiro's finding shows that “substantial variation in college students' use of ... coping strategies (Coiro).”

The period of entering and studying in college is no less significant than the puberty in people's developments. The college experience might be the first chance for young adults to live independently without cares and controls from their parents, to engage in highly intellectual materials that shape their insights toward the world and the society, and to learn knowledges that will support their career paths. Thus, indulging mental health problems negatively influencing the college experience is unwise. Based on my research, I would like to offer a close view on how college students are impacted by mental illnesses through real examples, why should and how can schools and families help coping with mental health problems of college students. The research result can be an inspiration for people who want to keep improving the current state of mental health problems in college students.

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